

Outline for Cuba II Story, Monday, June 18, 1990

Why study the Cuban Missile Crisis now?

Because it was the Three Mile Island of the nuclear weapons era.

For a generation it has been believed that the risks that a nuclear weapon would be used in combat would increase as the weapons came to be possessed by larger numbers of states, especially less-developed states, which would probably have less advanced command and control and warning systems and technological restraints, and whose leaders might, in some cases, be less balanced and cautious. That time is now upon us.

But if the danger of a nuclear war is about to increase, the question arises, just how great is that danger likely to be? The answer depends, in part, on our sense of how great the danger was before. Among "experts," something of a consensus seems to be arising that the danger over the last generation was generally overestimated, especially by the public, and that it was, in reality, very small, virtually negligible.

In particular this judgment has been emerging, as new data have appeared in the last few years, for the specific case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which is generally agreed to have been the most dangerous episode of the nuclear era. If it is true that even in this case the real risk was extremely low, it would follow that the cumulative danger over the whole nuclear era till now had been exaggerated by many and that concern over the risks of proliferation in the future might be similarly overwrought.

On the other hand, if this emerging consensus about the Cuban Missile Crisis should be mistaken--as I have come to conclude--then such a reassurance would be undermined. If, as I believe, the leaders even of the two superpowers did not avoid taking decisions that invoked real, sizeable risks of nuclear war in this confrontation (and perhaps others), then realistic, significant dangers of nuclear war do not begin with proliferation but rather, are increased to still higher levels that justify very urgent concern.

This would not be an unfamiliar judgment. It has been held by a large part of the public at various periods when their anxiety about nuclear war was high, such as at the time of the Missile Crisis itself (and for a year or two earlier) and in the first two years of the Reagan era. But concern has greatly diminished in other periods, when the superpowers seemed less combative and particularly when serious arms control negotiations were underway.

Even before the present dissolution of the Cold War, new data from both US and Soviet former officials seemed to support the retrospective judgment especially among specialists that both they and the public had overestimated the likelihood that the Cuban

Missile Crisis might erupt into superpower war, either non-nuclear or nuclear.

However, I believe that these partial data have been misinterpreted, by analysts who have ignored or missed the significance or been ignorant of still other data which have recently emerged or which have remained secret till now.

Looking at the whole context I find that a lesson of the Crisis is that even leaders of the stature and maturity of John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, each aware that the other possessed numbers of nuclear missiles capable of inflicting catastrophic damage, consciously took what each saw, correctly, as significant risks of nuclear war (risks that were, in retrospect, even larger than they calculated) for reasons that few responsible observers would judge to justify such risks (if anything could).

If the actual calculations and behavior of these two superpower leaders are taken as a baseline forecast of the possible behavior in crises of leaders much less constrained by public opinion, legal and constitutional strictures, political experience and an experienced bureaucracy, the prospect is not reassuring at all.

To study the Cuban Missile Crisis in the light of these new data and interpretations is to learn both that the risks of an emerging era of nuclear proliferation are indeed ominously great, and to learn some of the reasons why this is true, how nuclear war could actually erupt. This understanding can contribute to moderating some of these risks as weapons do proliferate, but above all, it adds urgency to preventing such proliferation and to eliminating existing doctrines of deployment and use and eventually, existing stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

It is undoubtedly true that the danger of nuclear war between the US and the USSR is less today than it was at various earlier periods and it may well remain so. But that danger is reduced--not down to zero--from a level that was unacceptably high, for reasons that have long been kept secret and are not yet well understood by almost anyone. Those reasons demand urgently to be appreciated now, because they bear on the real likelihood that nuclear war could erupt between other countries in the future. Such a war would not only be vastly destructive even it remained "limited"; it could be the necessary trigger to global superpower nuclear war, long after the Cold War era had irreversibly dissolved.

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etc

crisis → other danger